



“A MASTERWORK!”

New York Stage Review

WE HAD A WORLD



A NEW PLAY BY

**JOSHUA
HARMON**

DIRECTED BY

**TRIP
CULLMAN**



Opening Night March 19, 2025 | New York City Center Stage II



**“Compassionate and real with
STANDOUT PERFORMANCES!”**

The New York Times

“ANDREW BARTH FELDMAN is FANTASTIC.”

The New York Times

**“JEANINE SERRALLES
is by turns HILARIOUS
and TOUCHING.”**

NEW YORK
The Sun

**“JOANNA GLEASON
is A MARVEL
TO WATCH.”**

New York Stage Review



**“DELICATE, EXTREMELY
MOVING, AND INCOMPARABLY
PERFORMED!”**

THEATERMANIA

MANHATTAN THEATRE CLUB

NEW YORK CITY CENTER STAGE II

ARTISTIC DIRECTOR
LYNNE MEADOW

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
CHRIS JENNINGS

PRESENT

WE HAD A WORLD

BY
JOSHUA HARMON

WITH

**ANDREW BARTH
FELDMAN**

**JOANNA
GLEASON**

**JEANINE
SERRALLES**

SCENIC DESIGN
**JOHN LEE
BEATTY**

COSTUME DESIGN
**KAYE
VOYCE**

LIGHTING DESIGN
**BEN
STANTON**

SOUND DESIGN
**SINAN REFIK
ZAFAR**

WIG & MAKE-UP
DESIGN
**TOMMY
KURZMAN**

CASTING
**KELLY
GILLESPIE**

PRODUCTION STAGE
MANAGER
**BESS MARIE
GLORIOSO**

DIRECTED BY
TRIP CULLMAN

ASSOCIATE ARTISTIC DIRECTOR
**NICKI
HUNTER**

GENERAL MANAGER
**ROBERT
CARROLL**

CHIEF STRATEGY AND
COMMUNICATIONS OFFICER
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DIRECTOR OF
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PRODUCTION
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**KATE
MARTINEZ**

DIRECTOR OF LEARNING AND
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT
**RAE
DE VINE**

Major support for Stage II is provided by the Harold and Mimi Steinberg Charitable Trust.

Additional support for this production is provided by the Laura Pels

International Foundation for Theater.

***We Had a World* was originally commissioned by
Roundabout Theatre Company, New York, NY.**

WE HAD A WORLD

A Play by Joshua Harmon

Agent: John Buzzetti
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MTC Production Draft: March 2025

CHARACTERS:

Renee, 60's to 90's

Ellen, 30's to 60's

Joshua, 5 to 30's

The play takes place from 1988-2018.

Renee emerges in a nightgown, as Joshua enters from the other side of the stage, about to get dressed.

RENEE

Joshua.

They are now on a phone call.

It's your grandmother. I've got your next play here in my apartment.

JOSHUA

What?

Quick beat

RENEE

Your next play. It's here in my living room. It's called Battle of the Titans.

JOSHUA

Battle of the Titans?

RENEE

It's about your mother and your aunt.

JOSHUA

Oh. Well that'll be... (*unspoken: fucking brutal*)

RENEE

Your mother says she's going to bring Passover to our apartment. Fine. Then Susan decides to fly in, now your mother says she won't step foot in the apartment if Susan's here. So we're to send Susan away before you people arrive-- I can't keep up with it all.

JOSHUA

Oh boy.

RENEE

All I know is, it'll be Virginia Woolf, Part II.

JOSHUA

I have-- always wanted to write about our family, I didn't know if-- I had your permission?

RENEE

Absolutely.

JOSHUA

Oh, that's-- that's good to know.

RENEE

But I want you to promise me something.

JOSHUA

Ok...

RENEE

Make it as bitter and vitriolic as possible.

JOSHUA

Oh. Ok. Well, I'll-- do my best?

RENEE

You can even make your grandmother a real Medea.

JOSHUA

I don't know about all that, but, I'm glad to know I have your blessing.

RENEE

Absolutely. It ought to be a real humdinger.

JOSHUA

I guess there's a lot of fighting?

RENEE

It's all so angry, and it's all so stupid.

JOSHUA

Yeah. How are you feeling?

RENEE

I feel fine! I feel absolutely fine! They tell me I'm dying, but I wouldn't know it.

JOSHUA

Well that's-- that's good.

RENEE

Alright baby. I'll see you this afternoon.

Lights fade on Renee, as Joshua turns to us, and continues dressing.

JOSHUA

Before I can take you to Nana's apartment, you probably want to know a few things. Like why my aunt and mother don't want to be in the same room. But giving you the sixty five year blow by blow of that relationship would... we only have one play, so... just take my word.

It's March, 2018. Nana was just diagnosed with metastasized pancreatic cancer. She's almost 94, they're not gonna operate. And while you could say, we are all, always, dying-- she is now, legitimately, dying.

In a few months, the highest point in Sweden-- the southern peak of Kebnekaise Mountain-- will become the *second* highest point, when the glacier that's sat atop it for millennia-- melts.

But first-- a small family drama?

There's going to be enough ugly stuff, so let's start with something good: It's the late 1980's. I'm five years old, and Nana has signed us up for a two week course at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Just me and her. I live in the suburbs, which, even as a child, I know is not where I belong. Nana lives in New York City. For two weeks, my parents bring me on their daily commute to work, Mom hands me off to Nana, we take the bus uptown, where those two great fountains-- the old ones, not the replacements paid for by megarich polluter David Koch-- in blood money, I might add-- shoot water into the air opposite the magnificent limestone mansions of Fifth Avenue.

RENEE

Come here, pussycat.

Renee is now dressed. Maybe she's wearing her open toed Bass sandals and her black and white World Wildlife Federation wolves t-shirt, with her wallet in a string around her wrist. Or maybe she's in something else.

Renee always treats Joshua like a full fledged adult, whatever his age, so there is no need to become a little boy.

JOSHUA

First: a word on how Nana speaks. Though she was born in Brooklyn, granddaughter of immigrants, a few years before the Great Depression-- Renee puts on airs. She has this weird pseudo-British accent. At restaurants, she asks:

RENEE

May we have some bread and *but-tah*?

JOSHUA

And:

RENEE

Would you pass the *pep-pah*?

JOSHUA

And she always wants to discuss the latest ad-verrrr-tisments.

RENEE

And this is where they would *baaathe*.

JOSHUA

She's just told me about the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiller, and the children who lived at the Met.

What if someone saw?

RENEE

They went first thing, before anyone was awake. And at night, they would sleep inside the museum. Let's choose a bed for you. Which do you like?

JOSHUA

That one.

RENEE

Uh huh. Why?

JOSHUA

I like how high it is. But how do you get into it?

RENEE

That's a good question. Sir, how does one get into that bed?

JOSHUA

Nana loves to ask questions at museums.

RENEE

Is that light fixture original to the room? Oh, it's just a fluorescent, I see.

JOSHUA

Sometimes she asks questions just to ask them, I don't think she even cares about the answer.

RENEE

Can you tell me in what century fringe on rugs became fashionable?

JOSHUA

A few years later, she takes me to see Dances with Wolves.

RENEE

Kevin Costner lies on a table, waiting for his horribly gangrened foot to be amputated. Then slowly, very slowly, he reaches for his boot and works it over the bloody, oozing--

ELLEN

Mom! He's seven!

RENEE

So? We had a great time.

ELLEN

What's it rated?

RENEE

How should I know?

ELLEN

R? Is it rated R?

RENEE

Well. It shouldn't be.

ELLEN

Uh, news flash: you are not on the board that decides the movie ratings.

RENEE

At one point, they hunt bison, and eat one of its livers--raw! Fabulous!

ELLEN

Was there nudity?

RENEE

How should I know?

JOSHUA

You see Kicking Bird and his wife doing stuff when they think everyone's asleep, and then Kevin Costner goes swimming, and... you see his butt.

ELLEN

Mom! I don't want him seeing those kind of movies yet.

RENEE

Then don't take him. Your mother is such a prude.

JOSHUA

A word on how my mother speaks: When I went to college and told my friends about her, she sounded a lot like Marisa Tomei in "My Cousin Vinny."

ELLEN

Strong Brooklynese

"Imagine you're a deer. You're prancing along, you get thirsty, you spot a little brook, you put your little deer lips down to the cool water... BAM! A fuckin bullet rips off part of your head!"

JOSHUA

Then she visited, and introduced herself to my friends:

ELLEN

Hello, I'm Ellen, it's so nice to meet you.

JOSHUA

They were confused.

ELLEN

Because I don't talk like that.

JOSHUA

I know but like, even that? Like, when your voice? Travels through the air? It hits my ear drum in this like, very particular way that's like:

Brooklynese

I don't *tawk* like that.

ELLEN

And like, now? A word? About how my son talks?

JOSHUA

I don't talk like that.

ELLEN

No I know but like, as your voice? Travels? Through the air? That's just like, how it hits my ear.

RENEE

I agree.

JOSHUA

I'll watch the likes. Back to Dances with Wolves:

ELLEN

No R-Rated movies. PG-13. That's it. Kapeesh?

JOSHUA

But I learned my lesson, and a few years later, I didn't say a word after Nana took us to a Mapplethorpe exhibit.

I was only nine. I didn't yet grasp the concept of fisting.

ELLEN

She took you to Mapplethorpe? She's a sick fuck.

JOSHUA

Then she took me to a gallery where we saw something called "Pubic Hair on Soap." It was-- exactly as it sounds.

Renee and Joshua look at it for a moment.

RENEE

Vehhhhhry interesting.

JOSHUA

She brought me everywhere-- exhibits on Magritte, and Faberge eggs, and when I was ten, she handed me a play:

RENEE

If you read this, I will take you to see it.

JOSHUA

You can usually read a play in one sitting. I was a kid. It took a month. I didn't understand much, but I read it, and once I did, she bought us tickets.

RENEE

Two for Medea.

JOSHUA

I'm ten.

RENEE

Now before we go, tell me: what did you think of it?

JOSHUA

It's hard to follow. She kills her children?

RENEE

Yes. To get revenge on her husband.

JOSHUA

How does she do it?

RENEE

Like this.

She pretends to slice his neck.

Aaahhhhhh!

JOSHUA

I don't think my Mom would ever kill me.

RENEE

No, I don't suppose she would.

JOSHUA

Would you ever kill your children?

RENEE

It would depend on the situation.

ELLEN

Nice.

JOSHUA

We take our seats. The play stars Diana Rigg. Again, I don't know how much I understand-- but I am mesmerized. And all these years later, I still remember Medea's golden chariot, rising into the sky.

Nana does not know it-- neither do I-- but I am ten years old, and she has just changed my life.

ELLEN

When can we get to the ugly stuff?

JOSHUA

Soon.

ELLEN

How soon?

JOSHUA

Soon. But it won't make sense without the good stuff.

ELLEN

What good stuff?

JOSHUA

You forget, but you two would talk, like, six times a day.

RENEE

Yes?

ELLEN

So I get to this parent's association meeting--

RENEE

Right.

ELLEN

Which I only joined out of guilt, since I can never do anything at Joshua's school, but I work for a living! But there I am, in a roomful of parents-- all mothers--

RENEE

Certainly.

ELLEN

Thirty minutes in, they're still debating what *oil* the lunch should be cooked in: Peanut or canola? Which is healthier? Which has a higher fat content-- Finally I said, "Am I the only one in this room with a *job*? Use whatever fucking oil you want."

RENEE

Good for you.

ELLEN

Oh, oh and then-- get this--

JOSHUA

Or for your 40th-- Nana had us over for a feast-- she spent three days cooking your favorite childhood dishes.

ELLEN

Oh my god! Mom! Gribenes?

JOSHUA

Fried chicken skins-- it's disgusting.

ELLEN

Delicious. Mom! Thank you!

RENEE

You're welcome!

ELLEN

And lamb chops. No one ask for ketchup!

JOSHUA

Why?

RENEE

It's an old story.

ELLEN

Mom once spent a whole day making lamb chops for dinner.

RENEE

I really worked hard on it, I served it with parsley--

ELLEN

She gives it to us and Susan says, "can I have ketchup?"

RENEE

I said, "You want ketchup? I'll give you ketchup."

ELLEN

And dumped the whole jar on her plate!

RENEE

Susan ran from the table, very upset.

ELLEN

God that was funny.

And you made Krau Pretzel!

RENEE

Yah.

JOSHUA

Krau Pretzel comes from Nana's Hungarian grandfather.

RENEE

Peasant food.

JOSHUA

Cabbage and noodles, fried in butter.

RENEE

It's actually called Kraut Spaetzle, but the kids couldn't pronounce it, they called it Krau Pretzel, the name stuck.

JOSHUA

You taught me to make that, too.

RENEE

It worked both ways. You taught me things.

JOSHUA

She's talking about this book I had, as a kid.

RENEE

Fifty Simple Things Kids Can Do To Save the Earth.

JOSHUA

I was a conservationist, even at a young age.

RENEE

You taught me to brush my teeth again, in my sixties.

JOSHUA

You don't need to run the water. Just wet your toothbrush, and turn it off. You can save a lot of water that way.

RENEE

Yes but I didn't know that until you told me so.

JOSHUA

It never occurred to you to turn off the water?

RENEE

It never did. We didn't think of these things. We were stupid. Now I know. I turn it off. And each time I brush my teeth, I think of you.

JOSHUA

We taught each other. I learned about Fraunces' Tavern in school, then you took me there.

RENEE

Downtown, surely, where General Washington ate with his soldiers. I wonder whether their boots had heels. Sir, did the Revolutionary soldiers' boots have heels?

JOSHUA

That's the waiter, Nana.

RENEE

So?

JOSHUA

We toured Gracie Mansion. I think Dinkins was mayor.

RENEE

Could be.

JOSHUA

You took me to *The Heiress*, on Broadway, with Cherry Jones.

RENEE

She was marvelous, absolutely marvelous. "Bolt the door, Mariah." I still get goosebumps!

JOSHUA

When I was in seventh grade, snowstorms kept pummeling the region-- this is the winter of '96, when New York still got snow. I wake up one morning to yet another snow day, and Mom says:

ELLEN

Call Nana, maybe she'd like to spend the day with you.

RENEE

I have a doctor's appointment-- I'll cancel it. Come. We'll go to the movies.

JOSHUA

We see three films. First up, at 9:30 in the morning, Mike Leigh's masterpiece, *Secrets and Lies*.

RENEE

Absolutely brilliant.

JOSHUA

Next, we sneak down the hall for a freebie: *Sling Blade*.

RENEE

I'm glad we didn't pay for that one.

JOSHUA

Finally, the pièce de résistance: *the English Patient*. At this point, I fall asleep, but not Nana. She never sleeps during movies or plays.

RENEE

I'd love to see the desert some day, wouldn't you?

JOSHUA

When we walk, Nana always takes my arm.

Thank you for dropping all your plans to see me.

RENEE

Are you kidding? Anytime, baby.

Beat

ELLEN

You ready?

Joshua nods.

When he was fifteen, Joshua wanted to be-- oh, God-- an actor. But despite my strong belief that that is a leisure activity to enjoy on the side as you pursue a professional career, I sign him up for Saturday classes at The Neighborhood Playhouse. One of his teachers is directing a workshop of a new musical and asks Joshua to be in it. For a week after school, he goes into the city to rehearse. He's convinced this will be his big break.

JOSHUA

This will probably be my big break.

ELLEN

The day of the performance, I drive into work and park near the theatre, so I can take him home after.

JOSHUA

Dad isn't there?

ELLEN

No, he's home with your sisters.

JOSHUA

But Nana and Grandpa come.

Renee appears.

At intermission, I run out to say hello, then go back to perform Act Two. Afterwards, Mom is waiting for me.

Renee is gone.

ELLEN

Oh my god, you were so good!

JOSHUA

Really?

ELLEN

Yes!

JOSHUA

But like, how good?

ELLEN

You were the best one up there. By a mile. I'm being completely objective.

JOSHUA

Where's Nana?

ELLEN

She wasn't feeling well.

JOSHUA

They left?

ELLEN

They had to go home.

JOSHUA

They missed my song.

ELLEN

You have *such* a beautiful voice. Will you sing it for Dad?

JOSHUA

Is she ok?

ELLEN

Yeah, she just didn't feel well.

JOSHUA

We walk to the garage. I make her rank my performance against everyone else's. We get in the car. We drive up the highway. I am staring out the window, looking at how dark the trees appear at night, thinking about the show, and my beautiful voice, and the great career I am on the cusp of having, wondering who was in the audience, who saw me, who's about to discover me and make all my dreams come true. Then I look over at my mother.

Beat

ELLEN

It's nothing, I'm fine.

JOSHUA

What...

ELLEN

I'm fine, I'm... I shouldn't-- I'm fine.

JOSHUA

Why are you upset?

Mom?

Tell me!

Beat

ELLEN

Nana wasn't sick, honey. She was drunk. She was drunk.

JOSHUA

What?

ELLEN

Nana's an alcoholic.

Beat

I never told you, I didn't want... but she's an alcoholic. She always has been. My whole childhood.

Beat. Joshua looks at Ellen, wanting more.

I'd come home from school and find her in a pool of vomit. Dad was at work, Robert was useless, Susan was never home, so it would fall to me to pick her up, clean her up, put her to bed. One summer, we were in Massachusetts, Dad was working in the city, and she was three sheets to the wind, driving us on these dark, twisty roads-- we were screaming from the backseat, trying to keep her from swerving-- I thought for sure she would kill us.

JOSHUA

But-- why haven't I ever seen her drunk?

ELLEN

Because when you were born, I told her, "If you want a relationship with your grandson, you are never to drink in front of him. Ever. Do I make myself clear?"

RENEE

Yes.

ELLEN

No second chances here.

RENEE

Understood.

ELLEN

That's why.

JOSHUA

Is that why she always has water at dinner?

ELLEN

Yes.

JOSHUA

I just thought she liked water.

ELLEN

No. It's why I went to boarding school junior year.

JOSHUA

I thought it was cause you hated your school?

ELLEN

No. I had to get away. It's why Susan joined every after-school activity-- Hebrew School, even-- ironic now-- but she'd do anything not to face it. It's probably why Nana dumped a jar of ketchup on Susan's plate.

JOSHUA

I thought that was a funny story?

Quick beat

ELLEN

She would get drunk, I'd take care of her-- but then she and Grandpa would get mad at me: "you're wrong, your mother wasn't drunk"-- I'd cleaned up her vomit-- and then *they* would stop speaking to *me* until eventually, *I* would have to apologize to *her*. "I'm sorry." They somehow turned it all around and made me the bad guy, made me feel crazy...

JOSHUA

At this point, we are home, at the kitchen table. My sisters are asleep, my father's upstairs. This is before cell phones. Right now, the only people on Earth who know what's just happened are me, and my mother.

ELLEN

Maybe I shouldn't have told you.

JOSHUA

No, I'm glad you did. I just-- don't understand why you never told me before.

ELLEN

Maybe I should have. I don't know. I wanted you to have a relationship with her, and you love her so much, and-- she really had stopped drinking these last fifteen years. I would know. I talk to Mom, what, six times a day? I can hear it in her voice if she's had half a drink, two drinks, four-- I know exactly what she's had, and how much. I thought that was behind her.

Beat

JOSHUA

What's going to happen?

Beat

ELLEN

I don't know.

JOSHUA

What are you going to do?

ELLEN

I don't know.

I don't-- don't tell your sisters. I need to think about what to-- how to tell them.

Ellen kisses Joshua, and exits. He watches her go, then sits for a long, long moment, absorbing this new information.

Renee appears. She holds her toothbrush, having just brushed her teeth. She looks at it for a beat.

She sits down, and makes a call.

RENEE

Josh? It's your grandmother.

JOSHUA

Hi Nana.

RENEE

How are you dear?

JOSHUA

Ok. How are you?

RENEE

Fine. I'm calling because... I'm putting an article in the mail to you, I think you will find most interesting. About bison.

JOSHUA

Ok...

RENEE

They're doing well. There was some concern they might go extinct, but it seems private citizens are raising herds to make hamburger meat, so their numbers are headed in a good direction.

JOSHUA

They were going extinct?

RENEE

Yes.

JOSHUA

But now they're making hamburgers out of them so they're not going extinct?

RENEE

That's right.

JOSHUA

That doesn't... (*unspoken: make sense*) Ok.

RENEE

It's all in the article so, keep an eye out for it.

JOSHUA

Ok.

RENEE

Alright.

What else?

JOSHUA

Nothing. I'm just-- doing homework.

RENEE

Alright. Bye dear.

ELLEN

So she didn't say anything? That's the playbook. Pretend nothing happened.

JOSHUA

Maybe she doesn't know, that I know.

ELLEN

She knows.

I called Grandpa.

JOSHUA

You did?

ELLEN

He was furious. "You should not have told him!" Too bad. Get someone else to keep your secrets.

JOSHUA

But I didn't bring it up to her, so...

ELLEN

You shouldn't have to! You're the child! She's the adult!
If she's adult enough to get fall down drunk at her
grandson's play, she's adult enough to pick up the phone
and say, you're probably wondering why I left: I was drunk!

JOSHUA

Why are you so angry?

ELLEN

Why aren't you?

JOSHUA

Because, it's, I mean, it's an illness, no? She's sick.

ELLEN

Yeah, she's sick all right.

JOSHUA

It's a disease, isn't it?

ELLEN

No. Joshua-- she had every resource at her disposal, every
chance to get better-- she didn't want to. One time, we got
her to call a psychiatrist-- she hated psychiatrists-- but
she called, with all of us standing around, and said:

RENEE

My family thinks I'm sick.

ELLEN

Not:

RENEE

I need help.

ELLEN

Not:

RENEE

I have a disease.

ELLEN

Just:

RENEE

My family thinks I'm sick.

ELLEN

She'd go to the doctor, then drink, and then say:

RENEE

He couldn't fix me.

ELLEN

The structure of that sentence!

RENEE

He couldn't fix me.

ELLEN

Completely passive. Like it was the doctor's fault! She had every resource-- She ran a nursing business for Chrissake.

JOSHUA

Why do you think she drinks?

ELLEN

Who knows? Who cares? One time, she said:

RENEE

My mother preferred Martin.

ELLEN

Some bullshit like that.

JOSHUA

Maybe that's true. Grandpa won't let Nana put up any photos of her mother. Maybe she really was a bitch.

ELLEN

Of course she was. So what? Nana's a bitch-- I don't drink. I'm a bitch-- do you drink?

JOSHUA

You're not a bitch.

ELLEN

Of course I am. It's one of my best qualities.

And my father...

JOSHUA

What'd Grandpa do?

ELLEN

Nothing! He was supposed to protect us. If it is a disease-- *if*-- he didn't have it. He should have taken us and left, but he said she said she would kill herself.

"Then let her!"

"No, I could never do that."

It would have inconvenienced him too much. And he enabled it. When she was trying not to drink, he'd encourage her. "You can have one glass, hon, go on, hon."

JOSHUA

She said she would kill herself?

ELLEN

So he says. Who knows. Who cares.

Beat

JOSHUA

Mom?

Can we still do family bookclub?

ELLEN

What?

JOSHUA

Remember? We were gonna do a book club this summer? You me Dad Nana and Grandpa. Can we still?

Ellen looks at him: Is he seriously asking this of her?

ELLEN

Sure.

JOSHUA

We each choose a book. First up, Nana's pick: Cry the Beloved Country. Did you finish it?

ELLEN

I-- skimmed.

JOSHUA

You didn't finish?

ELLEN

Joshua, I have a full time job, get off my back.

JOSHUA

Dad works full time, he finished.

ELLEN

Well if Dad wants to start doing all the grocery shopping and making doctors appointments and dentist appointments and orthodontist appointments and researching summer camps and coordinating transportation and and and then maybe I'd have time to finish Cry the Beloved Country, but I don't see that happening, do you?

JOSHUA

Nana and Grandpa arrive. The hellos are ice cold.

RENEE

Hello Ellen.

ELLEN

Hello. Did you come sober, or drunk?

JOSHUA

Grandpa and I start yelling, a chorus of: Mom! Ellen! Mom! Ellen!

RENEE

No I'm not drunk!

ELLEN

How should I know?

JOSHUA

And yet, aside from this small outburst-- we actually sit down and discuss Cry the fucking Beloved Country.

RENEE

I found the character of Gertrude, the prostitute, to be most interesting.

ELLEN

Why?

The women go back to their books, then exit.

JOSHUA

There is no straight line to tell this story. One year my mother isn't speaking to her parents; the next, she's throwing a birthday dinner for her father. It's confusing.

For me, it's the beginning of something else: understanding that this thing we were all in, this family, is just a collection of individuals. It is the first time I understand two people, or three people, can look at the same thing and see something entirely different. Even the most benign object. Even just a chair.

Can I tell you about this chair? I love it. It's one of a pair, in Nana's apartment. I have always loved Nana's apartment. For one thing, it's in New! York! City! For another, it's filled with beautiful objects. Most of them she inherited from her uncle. He worked for a wealthy bachelor named Ferdi Schluss, and when Ferdi died, he left everything to Nana's uncle. I never questioned this story: *A bachelor boss leaves everything to a favorite... employee?*

Nevermind. The items are magnificent: Helleu portraits of Gibson girls with long necks and piled-up hair, Meissen figurines on marble bases, and my favorite, two matching high-backed love seats, covered in pale green silk. Nana bought these, the summer she went to Paris for furniture. Like out of an Edith Wharton novel.

To sit in one of these chairs is to know my Nana, on a cellular level, before she landed on the Upper East Side-- born and raised in Brooklyn, from immigrant stock-- and yet such aspirations. Her grandmother was French-- in a world of Poles and Hungarians, this was something to cling to-- so she returned to the motherland, bought a reproduction of something worthy of a palace and shipped it home, so when company came over, and she set out a plate of brie and

crackers and cold green grapes, she could sit in this chair, shoulders back, neck erect, and pretend, if only for a moment, she mattered.

RENEE

In the summer of 1960, I packed up my children and took them to Europe. Len was working, he would fly over later while the children were at camp in Switzerland, learning French. I'd always wanted to travel on the QE2, so I booked a suite, and the three children and I sailed the Atlantic. It was marvelous, it really was. Ellen got sea sick, of course she complained the whole time, but to wake each morning and see blue sky, and blue ocean...

When we got to Europe, I dropped the children off in Switzerland, kissed them goodbye, and got on the train to Paris. I checked into my hotel, a little nothing of a place in the eighth-- went upstairs, took off my shoes, and lay across the bed. I was thirty-five. I had been married eleven years. I had three children under the age of nine. I worked full time beside my mother at the nursing registry, and I realized this would be the first night I would be alone in more than a decade. No snoring lump next to me to disturb my sleep, no rat-a-tat tat on my shoulder at three in the morning because someone felt ill or had had a bad dream. My life was my own, it belonged to me, if only for two days before Len arrived. Imagine: it's 1960, you're thirty-five, and you're alone in Paris.

I made sure to dress impeccably. I felt the eyes of everyone the next morning as I went down to breakfast-- who is this elegant woman, sitting by herself? I finished my cafe and walked the streets to the left bank, and the antique shops I'd read so much about. I arrived at the Jacques Bodart Company, where two darling high backed love seats, covered in pale green silk, beckoned from the window. How might I feel, back in Brooklyn, walking past my living room and seeing them, catching the afternoon light? I went inside, sat in one of the chairs, more tired than I had realized, placed my hands on the arm rests, and hoped that once I brought them to America, anytime I sat in them again, I could conjure this moment, when I had felt so free.

ELLEN

I spent a week on a boat, puking in the bathroom. I had just turned six. Then Mom dropped us off in Switzerland where she said we would learn French but I didn't speak French and no one spoke English. My sister wouldn't talk to me, too humiliated anyone might think we were related. My brother said the best cure for homesickness was eating toothpaste, so we sat on our beds sucking down tube after tube until we had to go to the infirmary.

After a month of this, Mom picked us up. We met our cousins who had survived the war. Max was missing a finger and I couldn't stop staring, even though everyone kept pinching me. Then back on the boat to Brooklyn.

Mom had been so-so on the way over but not on the way back. At night, she'd lock us in the cabin and disappear for hours. Imagine: you're six, alone, in the middle of the night, in the middle of the ocean.

A few weeks after we were home, a shipment arrived. Suddenly we had twelve new dining room chairs and china cabinets and two love seats which we were told we were never under any circumstance whatsoever to sit on, touch, or go near. Mom even put a string up, to rope off the living room. She was very protective-- of her new furniture. But I didn't care. I didn't want to sit on those chairs.

JOSHUA

How are you celebrating?

RENEE

I'm not, really.

JOSHUA

What do you mean?

RENEE

Grandpa has a dinner with the electrical contractors, so I'll be here.

JOSHUA

But it's your birthday! That's not acceptable. How about I meet you after my internship? At Serendipity's?

RENEE

Would you?

JOSHUA

Mom: Will you be the waiter?

ELLEN

No.

JOSHUA

Mom?

ELLEN

Annoyed

Here's your sundae.

JOSHUA

Thank you!

RENEE

Oh my god! This is decadent.

JOSHUA

I love peanut butter.

RENEE

Do you? So do I.

JOSHUA

Now isn't this better than sitting home alone?

RENEE

Much. It's maybe my favorite birthday ever.

JOSHUA

Good, I'm glad!

RENEE

Now, tell me about Miramax. Have you met Harvey yet?

JOSHUA

No-- I bring dailies to his office, but his assistants told me not to look in, just keep my head down.

RENEE

How exciting! And what do they pay you for this work?

JOSHUA

It's an internship, they don't. I get ten dollars a day, it doesn't even cover the train, but so what? I just think it's crazy that like, six years ago, we watched *The English Patient*, and now I'm inside the studio that made it!

RENEE

Oh Josh, it's thrilling!

ELLEN

Annoyed

Here's your check.

Renee grabs it.

JOSHUA

Are you sure?

RENEE

Of course. You're not even making money.

JOSHUA

Thank you for taking me out.

RENEE

We took each other out.

JOSHUA

Alright. I guess Grandpa couldn't change his plans?

RENEE

You know how he is. *Hon! Hon! I have the electrical contractors.*

JOSHUA

Yeah.

RENEE

But I'd rather have you to myself.

JOSHUA

Remember when I hid around the corner while you told Grandpa I had fallen off a cliff?

RENEE

He was not amused.

JOSHUA

I thought it was funny.

RENEE

Yes, well. We share the same kind of humor, I guess.

JOSHUA

Sick.

RENEE

Yes, I suppose we are...

ELLEN

The rug works well in here.

JOSHUA

You bought it.

ELLEN

But I hadn't seen it.

JOSHUA

Sophomore year of college, Mom flies out for my spring concert. I'm in an a cappella group-- don't judge.

ELLEN

What is this?

JOSHUA

Birthday presents. For you.

ELLEN

Oh!

JOSHUA

This is a book I saw that I thought might be interesting to you, about children of alcoholics.

ELLEN

Rolling her eyes

Ok.

JOSHUA

I thought it would be interesting for you.

ELLEN

Ok.

JOSHUA

Do you think it looks interesting?

ELLEN

What else?

JOSHUA

And this is a journal. I thought it might be nice for you to have a place where you could write about your feelings.

ELLEN

Ok.

JOSHUA

Have you ever journaled?

ELLEN

No.

JOSHUA

I like to. It's-- helpful, when I want to like, understand something better, or--

ELLEN

Ok.

JOSHUA

Mom?

ELLEN

What?

JOSHUA

You don't seem, like, that excited by any of these?

ELLEN

I said thank you.

JOSHUA

Did you?

ELLEN

I think so.

JOSHUA

Ok but, like, do you think you want to read this, or...

ELLEN

I don't know.

Quick beat

JOSHUA

It was-- I was very upset when I heard you went off by yourself on your birthday last week.

ELLEN

So, what, everyone's talking about me behind my back?

JOSHUA

No, but, Rebecca was concerned, Dad was concerned, we were concerned.

ELLEN

Don't be, I'm fine.

JOSHUA

Why did you take yourself to the diner for breakfast, alone, at six in the morning?

ELLEN

I wanted to. It was my birthday, that's what I wanted.

JOSHUA

Ok, but, I think people felt like you were-- like it was punitive, like you were mad at them.

ELLEN

I'm not mad.

JOSHUA

You seem mad.

ELLEN

I'm not! Can we stop? I didn't come here for this.

JOSHUA

Then what did you come for?

ELLEN

To see your concert--

JOSHUA

That's not til tonight.

ELLEN

I don't want to talk about this anymore!

JOSHUA

Ok, yeah, no, you're totally not mad. I'm so glad you came, this is really fun.

ELLEN

Enough.

JOSHUA

At least now, *whatever* you're feeling, you have a journal to process it.

ELLEN

Terrific.

Quick beat

JOSHUA

Would you maybe, want to talk to a therapist?

ELLEN

No. Ok? No.

JOSHUA

I think it would help.

ELLEN

There's nothing to talk about.

JOSHUA

Mom: it's not a suggestion, I'm telling you: you need to see a therapist.

ELLEN

Who do you think you are?

RENEE

Hello?

JOSHUA

Your son! Trying to help you! Which is not my responsibility but I am like, going out of my way for you.

RENEE

I need one pair of tickets, for me and my grandson.

JOSHUA

You have to deal with your parents if you're ever gonna process--

ELLEN

I have spent enough of my life dealing with my parents. I have given enough time to my parents. I am not wasting another minute of my life talking about my parents.

RENEE

Two for Blue Man Group.

JOSHUA

But it's not for them, it's for you, how it impacts--

ELLEN

Joshua!

RENEE

Joshua.

ELLEN

Enough!

RENEE

It's your grandmother.

ELLEN

I'm done with this conversation!

RENEE

Joshua?

JOSHUA

Nana. Hi. I'm just about to leave to meet you.

RENEE

I'm not going to be able to see Bl-- Blue Man Group with you today.

JOSHUA

Oh no. Is everything ok?

RENEE

I'm drunk. I got drunk.

JOSHUA

Oh.

RENEE

I'm an asshole.

JOSHUA

No, you're not an asshole--

RENEE

The tickets are at the box office, I called, you can pick them up. Can you find a friend to go with you?

JOSHUA

Uhm, I think it's too late to find someone.

RENEE

Well I'd still like you to use the ticket for yourself at least. Will you?

JOSHUA

Uhm, I don't think so.

RENEE

Don't you want to see Blue Man Group?

JOSHUA

Not really? I was going because you wanted to.

RENEE

What a waste.

ELLEN

Susan called me.

RENEE

I'm sorry baby.

ELLEN

She said, "that's funny, Mom never gets drunk when she sees *my* family."

JOSHUA

What'd you say?

ELLEN

Well, she gets drunk when she sees mine.

JOSHUA

Why has Nana only gotten drunk when she's seeing me?

ELLEN

To hurt me. We were always the closest, it's happened twice, both times, she was seeing *my* child. Twice is not a coincidence. Twice, is deliberate.

JOSHUA

Is it about you, or... me?

ELLEN

Maybe. You're the one who keeps making plans with her...

JOSHUA

Right...

ELLEN

You get what you get.

JOSHUA

You make plans with her.

ELLEN

Only when I have to.

Why do you keep seeing her?

JOSHUA

Is that a problem?

ELLEN

You're an adult, do what you want. I just don't understand what you get out of it.

JOSHUA

I... she's my grandmother.

ELLEN

Your sister wants nothing to do with them, but. She's protective of me.

JOSHUA

Are you implying I'm not?

ELLEN

She's protective of me.

Joshua exits.

RENEE

When does Joshua's plane land?

ELLEN

In an hour.

RENEE

Rome?

ELLEN

Naples. To backpack around before his study abroad starts.

RENEE

A semester in France! How marvelous!

ELLEN

I don't know if it's so marvelous, they're having the worst heat wave in years over there.

RENEE

Record breaking, yah, I read. 2003 will be the hottest summer since 1540.

ELLEN

I just...

RENEE

What?

ELLEN

He's... You can't say anything without him snapping at you.

JOSHUA

Mom! Stop!

RENEE

He doesn't snap at me.

ELLEN

Well, he snaps at me. And he's secretive. Is everything ok?

JOSHUA

I'm *fine*.

ELLEN

But then I get these calls...

JOSHUA

I want to be a singer-songwriter.

ELLEN

Uhm, what?

JOSHUA

Actually, I want to be a writer.

ELLEN

Ok, so, write.

JOSHUA

Mom!

ELLEN

What? You want to be a writer? Start writing.

JOSHUA

You're so fucking dismissive.

ELLEN

Why don't you just focus on your classes.

JOSHUA

Because. They're stupid. They assign too much reading. I can't read a whole Dickens novel in a week.

ELLEN
What else do you have to do?

JOSHUA
I'm busy!

ELLEN
With what?

JOSHUA
You're so dismissive!

ELLEN
With what?

JOSHUA
A cappella! It takes up a lot of time.

ELLEN
Last spring he said he needed to take some time off.

JOSHUA
I want to go to Sicily.

ELLEN
To do what?

JOSHUA
Pick oranges.

RENEE
How exciting!

ELLEN
Mom! He's not dropping out of college to pick oranges. And he's nasty.

RENEE
Nasty, how?

ELLEN
I saw, in his dorm room, the mirror they'd put up was cracked, so I got him a new one. He completely melted down:

JOSHUA

IF I HAD AN ISSUE WITH MY BROKEN MIRROR, I WOULD HAVE
GOTTEN A NEW MIRROR! I DON'T NEED YOU TO GET ME A NEW
MIRROR ESPECIALLY WHEN I DON'T EVEN WANT A NEW MIRROR I
DON'T WANT IT--

ELLEN

FINE! I will take the mirror back! Fine.

Like that.

JOSHUA

Distraught

Mom?

ELLEN

Hi sweetie! Did you land?

JOSHUA

Yeah but my suitcase is lost, they don't know where it is
and my bank card doesn't work and I already sweat through
my shirt it's so hot and the lady at my hostel said:

RENEE

Italian accent

"If they lose your luggage, it arrives never."

ELLEN

It will arrive, don't worry.

RENEE

"It arrives never."

ELLEN

It will arrive. I will deal with this.

JOSHUA

But you're at work, you have so much to do--

ELLEN

Joshua: I'm your mother. I'm a lawyer. I'm a bitch. You'll
have that suitcase. You're in Italy. Go. Eat some
spaghetti. I got this.

JOSHUA

But the lady at my hostel said--

RENEE

"Believe me, I work here twenty years, they lose your luggage, it arrives--"

Joshua's beat up backpack drops onto the stage. He is filled with a sense of wonder and gratitude at the mysterious strings his mother pulled thousands of miles away. Triumphantlly, he takes his bag and walks past the woman in the hostel. Before he goes:

JOSHUA

That fall, while I'm away, the Rosh Hashanah blowout of 2003 takes place back in New York.

ELLEN

You promised!!!

RENEE

It's my goddamn house, I'll have anyone I damn please.

ELLEN

It is your house! And you can have anyone you please, but you promised you'd tell me who was coming.

RENEE

And now you know.

ELLEN

Why didn't you say anything last week?

RENEE

Because I didn't know last week, Ellen.

ELLEN

No, when I called last week and said, if Susan plans to do one of her Rosh Hashanah free for alls where she bumps into some random person on the street and suddenly they're at our family dinner, let me know first. We don't want to spend the holidays with Susan's friend's dog trainer.

RENEE

Susan doesn't know any dog trainers, and neither do I.

ELLEN

If Susan wants to see friends, she should throw a dinner party. This is a religious holiday.

RENEE

Very religious, sitting around eating crackers.

ELLEN

Crackers. Yes, mother, you have always taken great pleasure in pretending not to know about your own heritage.

RENEE

It's not *my* heritage.

ELLEN

You're not Jewish?

RENEE

Not like you people.

ELLEN

I know these holidays mean nothing to you or Susan, but they actually mean something to us, so to impose your agenda on religious--

RENEE

Now I have an agenda! Well la dee da.

ELLEN

Last year, you gave the kids Channukah presents and said, "I wrapped this in Jew paper for you."

RENEE

Well what am I supposed to call... *that* paper?

ELLEN

Mom. When I called last week and asked if you could tell us your plans so we could decide if we want to join, you said:

Continuous, though we are now on the call from a week prior.

RENEE

Yes, Ellen, I will *tell* you our plans.

ELLEN

Thank you.

RENEE

Shall I sign in blood?

ELLEN

That won't be necessary. Your word is enough.

RENEE

You have my word, I'll make sure everyone on Earth is excluded so you and your family can be entirely alone.

ELLEN

Perfect. So who's coming?

RENEE

Your sister and you people, as far as I know.

ELLEN

As far as you know?

RENEE

Ellen. Don't be difficult. That's who's coming.

ELLEN

Then we will be there.

RENEE

Fine.

ELLEN

That was our conversation! Last week! And you never said a word.

RENEE

Because I didn't know last week, Ellen.

ELLEN

Then why didn't you call me when you found out?

RENEE

Because I'm not in the habit of asking permission to invite dinner guests to my own house!

ELLEN

You lied to me. You lied.

RENEE

We are talking about a dinner-- which *I* am making.

ELLEN

Ok, well, have a lovely time.

RENEE

You're not coming?!?!

ELLEN

No!

RENEE

I have been cooking for two days!

ELLEN

Give my best to the dog trainer.

RENEE

Ellen. I have been cooking for two days.

ELLEN

Then you should have called me, like you promised.

RENEE

If you don't come...

ELLEN

I'm not coming. That's done.

RENEE

Ellen! You are impossible!

ELLEN

You promised.

JOSHUA

You should have gone.

ELLEN

You're the one who said you don't like celebrating with strangers.

JOSHUA

I never said that!

ELLEN

So you like celebrating with strangers? You like that?

JOSHUA

I didn't say that, but...

ELLEN

And that's my point.

JOSHUA

I'm just saying, you didn't have to blow things up.

ELLEN

Great, so everyone thinks I'm wrong. Ok, Joshua, very helpful. Thanks.

JOSHUA

How do I explain to my mother, what's playing out here actually has nothing to do with Rosh Hashanah? These two women are dancing a very old dance, and no one can stop them, least of all me.

Quick beat

But-- this is not who they are. I mean, it is, but not *just* this. They're more than this, they're... Can I tell you about these women? They were children...

RENEE

After everyone was asleep, I'd sneak into the kitchen to be alone with the Ebinger's blackout cake.

Renee considers the cake.

I couldn't cut a slice-- they'd know. Instead, I'd slide a knife deep into the buttercream. The next morning, I'd act as perplexed as the others, trying to unravel the mystery of the sinking dessert.

JOSHUA

Adolescents:

ELLEN

They thought I was sleeping over at a friend's, but we snuck out and drove to Woodstock. I was there. At fifteen.

Which, I would never let you do, *such* bad parenting, but...
it was pretty cool to be there, seeing Richie Havens...

JOSHUA

They had jobs:

RENEE

First a school teacher. Then the nursing registry. A
receptionist at Windows on the World. An interior
decorator. Oh and for six months, auxiliary police officer.

ELLEN

Lawyer.

JOSHUA

And areas of expertise:

RENEE

And everyone would watch as Napoleon rode in on a great big
Arabian horse, which he named Marengo.

ELLEN

No before Antonio Banderas she was married to Don Johnson,
then divorced him, married Steven Bauer, divorced him,
remarried Don Johnson-- then divorced him a second time.

JOSHUA

They tucked me into bed at night...

ELLEN

Sleep tight. And remember: if the government ever
institutes another draft, we will run away to Canada. Sweet
dreams.

JOSHUA

And woke me in the morning:

*Joshua closes his eyes. Renee approaches quietly.
She wraps her fingers around his neck, as if to
strangle him.*

RENEE

AHHHHHHH!

JOSHUA

Yelping awake

Nana!

RENEE

Rise and shine, pussycat!

JOSHUA

They had passions:

RENEE

Books.

ELLEN

Magazines.

RENEE

The opera.

ELLEN

The ballet.

RENEE

Foie gras.

ELLEN

Foie gras. Also, fritos.

RENEE

Paris.

ELLEN

Paris.

JOSHUA

And then, their private selves-- those things they kept hidden, or revealed inadvertently. These are notes Nana wrote to herself, in 1997:

RENEE

"I believe I often see more than other people. I have attempted to train myself to notice what many others take for granted or seem to miss. Seldom do my acquaintances comment on a blue sky, a sunset, cloud formations, but when I call it to their attention they will say, "Yes, it is nice." It has become so much a habit that I almost always notice the colors (shirt, tie, suit) a luncheon companion will wear, not that it is important in a material sense but

just that I see it and make a mental note. I found doing this adds to my pleasure in being alive."

ELLEN

I was driving home today when this song came on and... it brought me back to that summer, junior year. I'd just broken up with a guy, a sweet guy, but... and he was devastated, he did not want the relationship to end--

JOSHUA

Mom?

ELLEN

I played this song over and over, crying in my room, and--

JOSHUA

Mom?

ELLEN

I think it's the most beautiful-- I want you to hear it.

JOSHUA

I'm eleven.

Ellen turns on Laura Nyro's "I Never Meant to Hurt You." She's transported to another time as the song plays. After a few lines:

RENEE

Ellen?

The music cuts out.

ELLEN

Yes Mom.

RENEE

It's your fiftieth next week. I'd like to take you to lunch.

ELLEN

This is a lovely spot.

RENEE

I'd hoped you would like it.

ELLEN

Seen anything good lately?

RENEE

We saw a most interesting film last night. About Jesus.

ELLEN

The Passion of the Christ?

RENEE

That's it.

ELLEN

It's supposed to be very antisemitic.

RENEE

I didn't find that to be the case, no.

ELLEN

Well, everyone else did.

It's a nice menu.

Nice salads...

Nana waits for her moment.

RENEE

Ellen dear? I miss you.

I miss being close, like we were.

What can I do?

A long beat

ELLEN

It can never be like it was before.

RENEE

No?

ELLEN

No. I can't-- no.

RENEE
Moving on

Ok.

Joshua, pained, watches them for a beat.

JOSHUA
I wonder how different things might have been had my mother said ok, let's try again. But who's to say Nana wouldn't have messed it up some other way. Maybe we're hard-wired for self-destruction. How else to explain that Reagan took down the White House solar panels Carter put up? The the 2004 hurricane season--

ELLEN
What-- What is this? What's the goal here? Or is this just, the greatest hits of the worst moments of my life?

JOSHUA
I'm trying to understand, how things could be so wonderful and then so awful.

ELLEN
I was there. It wasn't so wonderful.

JOSHUA
Sometimes it was.

ELLEN
It wasn't. You see her through rose-colored glasses, but you never--

JOSHUA
No I don't. I'm just not as judgmental as you.

ELLEN
You never call her on her shit, never push back, never--

JOSHUA
That's not true!

RENEE
August 4, 2004

Dear Nana & Grandpa,

I got your message about vacationing with you and my cousins. I'm not sure why I would be invited when no one else in my family was. I understand if you and members of my family are not getting along, but I do not appreciate being put in the middle.

Personally, I am very saddened that this family is not respectful of all its members. I cannot think of a more giving, generous, loving, thoughtful member than my mother, and attempts to hurt her hurt me very, very deeply. Trying to balance my relationship with my family and you has not been easy the past few years. But if you force me to choose sides, as it were, you must know I will always side with my family.

ELLEN

I never knew about this letter.

JOSHUA

You say I'm not protective of you, but...

ELLEN

I can see that you were...

RENEE

I'd like to ask a question, if I may.

ELLEN

Ok...

RENEE

Why wasn't I invited to your college graduation?

ELLEN

Oh here we go.

RENEE

Why wasn't I invited to your college graduation?

ELLEN

It wasn't important to him.

RENEE

You went.

ELLEN

To the ceremony. Then we packed up his room and drove home.
He was not in a good way.

RENEE

What does that mean, not in a good way?

*The women stare at him. Sensing their eyes,
Joshua turns away.*

ELLEN

He almost...

RENEE

Almost what?

ELLEN

Did something...

Quick beat

RENEE

I see.

What happened?

ELLEN

Mark and I were at home, Joshua called, the next thing I
know Mark is on the last flight to Chicago.

RENEE

Why didn't you both go?

ELLEN

Hi Sweetie. What's wrong?

JOSHUA

Is Dad there?

ELLEN

Yeah, sure. Mark!

RENEE

You didn't want your mother?

ELLEN

It's not ok

It's ok.

JOSHUA

Mom's good at fixing things. She tells you what to do.

RENEE

Yes she does.

JOSHUA

But like, Dad took me for pancakes, I sat at the table and sobbed, for an hour. And he just sat with me.

ELLEN

And that was comforting?

JOSHUA

Very.

ELLEN

Ok.

RENEE

What were you planning to do? Jump? Hang yourself? Shoot yourself?

Joshua looks at Renee. He won't answer.

Is this because you were gay?

JOSHUA

Partly.

RENEE

You never told me you were gay. I had to find out from Phil and Lorna.

JOSHUA

Mom told them, I guess.

RENEE

Why didn't you tell me?

JOSHUA

We never discussed personal things...

RENEE

I'm not gay.

JOSHUA

No, but, all personal things. We stopped getting personal.
And I was, depressed.

RENEE

I've never been depressed.

JOSHUA

Uh huh. Luckily, I had a good therapist.

RENEE

I've never been to a therapist.

JOSHUA

Neither has Mom.

ELLEN

If I needed one, I'd go. I don't need one.

JOSHUA

Uh huh.

RENEE

You have to understand, we didn't have all this crap
growing up.

JOSHUA

What crap?

RENEE

Therapy.

JOSHUA

Wasn't Freud born like, a hundred years before you?

RENEE

It's an enormous waste of time, if you ask me. And money.
Better to travel.

JOSHUA

Pointed

What's High Point?

He holds up a letter. This gets Renee's attention.

RENEE

Why do you have that?

JOSHUA

I found it after you died.

RENEE

That's not for you.

JOSHUA

Then you shouldn't have left it. What's High Point?

ELLEN

The institution Nana went to.

JOSHUA

Institution?

ELLEN

For a few weeks, a month. It didn't do any good.

RENEE

"September 29, 1969. Dear Len."

ELLEN

They couldn't fix her!

RENEE

"I had a fine nite feeling very free and proud as I wrote in last nites letter. However this morning I am having second thoughts."

ELLEN

I don't want to hear this.

RENEE

"Your speech about signing for 15 days-- therefore stay 15 days was a little too pat and prepared."

ELLEN

Throw that out.

RENEE

"I am still begging to be taken off these tranquilizers but there are excuses."

JOSHUA

Tranquilizers?

RENEE

"I finished "The Godfather" and several other books but my eyes are coming out of my head. I am truly very depressed and do not see anything of value to be gained by incarceration."

JOSHUA

You've never been depressed?

RENEE

"They want me to take a series of psychological tests which I believe I will refuse. I am not interested in the results at age 45."

JOSHUA

You've never been to a therapist?

ELLEN

Joshua, this is junk, it's junk, please--

JOSHUA

Junk? This is gold! This is going *right* in the play word for word-- Oh my god, Mom! Read them the letter Grandpa wrote when he said he was done being your father.

ELLEN

What? No!

JOSHUA

Mom: It's iconic. Read it.

ELLEN

"Dear Ellen:

In my wildest dreams, I never imagined writing this letter to you at this time in my life. You always occupied a very special place in my heart. However, as of July 15, 2005, your father shall no longer exist. I shall have no further communication with you.

I have felt your mother's pain and anguish. I have also shared her tears. I love her with all my heart and soul. She is my best friend. For reasons best known to you and your family, all of you have treated her as non-existent.

I want to wish you, Mark and your family many many years of health and happiness.

Goodbye
Dad

JOSHUA

Of course, this wasn't the end of Grandpa speaking to you.

ELLEN

But it bought me a year or two, of not having to deal with them.

JOSHUA

And for a while, my own father got a big kick out of signing all his emails, "Goodbye. Dad." Which we found very funny.

Beat

What?

ELLEN

She... *botched* it.

JOSHUA

What?

ELLEN

Jackie Onassis said if you botch raising your children, nothing else you do in life matters. And my mother, botched it. When I had you and your sisters, anytime I wasn't sure what to do, I'd think, what would Mom do? Then I'd do the opposite. And it was always right.

JOSHUA

I became a playwright because of her.

ELLEN

You became a playwright because of you. It had nothing to do with her.

JOSHUA

Disagree.

ELLEN

So she influenced you. I'm glad for that-- I am, but...

JOSHUA

It's complicated.

ELLEN

Not if you're her daughter, it's not.

JOSHUA

She's a smart woman. At the time she was growing up--

ELLEN

Oh spare me!

JOSHUA

At the time she was growing up, as a woman--

ELLEN

At the *time* she was growing up, you know who was growing up down the street? Ruth Bader Ginsberg.

JOSHUA

Aunt Susan said Nana got into Wellesley, but her parents wouldn't pay for it because they were saving the money for Martin, and he went to MIT. That could've been her life...

ELLEN

And who says she's smart? Because she reads books? She's smarter than Grandpa, but that's not saying much. At least he's sweet.

JOSHUA

Grandpa is sweet?

ELLEN

She's not a good person.

Renee, now in her late 80's, slowly returns. She reaches for Joshua's arm. He offers it.

RENEE

What did you think of the play?

JOSHUA

It was... dense. Maybe I'm stupid?

RENEE

No. It is. This is my third time seeing it, each time I find something new.

JOSHUA

Let me hail you a cab.

RENEE

Why? The bus drops me off half a block from my apartment.

JOSHUA

But we're all the way downtown, it's late-- it's after ten.

RENEE

So?

JOSHUA

So wouldn't you rather take a cab?

RENEE

I like the bus. And with my senior metrocard, it hardly costs a thing.

JOSHUA

I have probably taken more taxis in my life than you.

RENEE

You probably have.

JOSHUA

Well, I'll wait with you.

RENEE

You don't have to.

JOSHUA

Nana, I'm not leaving you on the Bowery.

RENEE

Why not?

JOSHUA

What if someone tried to mug you?

RENEE

Then I'd get mugged.

JOSHUA

Or rape you?

RENEE

Then they'd rape me.

JOSHUA

No-- that is not the-- I'll wait.

RENEE

Very good. Joshua-- look at that car. What a deep shade of green!

JOSHUA

Uh huh.

Quick beat. The bus arrives.

RENEE

You see how fast it comes?

Goodnight, pussycat.

JOSHUA

I watch my eighty-eight year old grandmother climb the three steps to get on the uptown bus, alone, at ten o'clock at night.

He is moved, watching her get on the bus.

ELLEN

She's not a good person.

JOSHUA

Jesus Christ! Why is everything with you black or white?!

ELLEN

Judgmental, was it?

JOSHUA

You are!

ELLEN

And you're grey. You see the brilliant nuance in everything, you have such a sophisticated grey palette.

JOSHUA

Mom! You can't even let me explain how you're judgmental without interrupting me to be judgmental!

ELLEN

Oh I'm sorry, let me be silent so you can judge me for being judgmental.

JOSHUA

You can't go two seconds without trying to control everything and I get it you had no control as a kid, but when you don't have control you're *unbearable*. You want us to pretend Nana's drinking had no impact on you and therefore no impact on us when it's obviously had a huge impact on all of us but you're like, "Therapy? For what? I'm fine," when clearly you are not fine!

Quick beat

Sorry, but... it's grey, it is. Like the letters she wrote, when we were in France.

ELLEN

What letters?

JOSHUA

In 1997, my parents take us to France. The motherland. While we are gone, Nana writes a series of short letters--sometimes at hourly intervals:

ELLEN

Friday, August 15, 1997. 11 AM.

RENEE

How are they rushing around to get ready?

ELLEN

1 PM.

RENEE

Are they ready? Shall we call? No, we said good-bye and they must be very busy.

ELLEN

7:30PM.

RENEE

Have they boarded the plane? Who is sitting with whom?

ELLEN

11 PM.

RENEE

Across the Atlantic. Is everyone asleep? All OK? Who ate his or her meal?

ELLEN

Saturday, August 16th. 8AM

RENEE

What did our three darling children think of Paris. Have you had chocolate and a croissant.

ELLEN

Tuesday August 19.
8AM

RENEE

Keep wondering what you are
doing,
truly miss you.

Wednesday
August 27th

Miss you all.

Saturday
August 30th.

Gosh do we miss you.

JOSHUA

That was her, too.

Beat. Ellen considers this information. Then:

RENEE

Joshua. It's your grandmother. Joshua?

JOSHUA

Hi Nana.

RENEE

Your mother tells me you have a friend?

JOSHUA

I'm seeing someone, yes.

RENEE

That's nice.

JOSHUA

Yeah.

RENEE

Is he circumcised?

ELLEN

She didn't.

JOSHUA

The first question out of her mouth.

RENEE

Grandpa and I would like to have you and your friend for dinner.

ELLEN

Friend?

JOSHUA

She's eighty-nine. It's fine. When we enter the apartment, it is filled with the scent of...

RENEE

Krau Pretzel.

JOSHUA

You didn't!

RENEE

I did.

JOSHUA

Oh my god, I haven't had that in so long.

RENEE

Good!

JOSHUA

Nana-- this is so nice.

RENEE

Has Nick ever had it?

JOSHUA

Definitely not.

My grandfather shows Nick a form letter from the New York Philharmonic, thanking him for donating fifty dollars, and which has some line in it about how invaluable donors like him are. I hear him say to Nick, "I guess I'm invaluable."

But when we sit down to dinner, they are on their best behavior, and Nana is in peak form: asking questions.

RENEE

Where did you grow up? Did you! How did you get interested in medicine? And what kind of medicine do you practice? Psychiatry. That's wonderful.

JOSHUA

My grandfather smiles at me, sweetly. The sound of a bus idling at a red light, then revving up, and car horns and air conditioners humming, all make their way up from the street to this apartment, where two almost ninety year olds have made dinner for their grandson, and his boyfriend.

ELLEN

Are you crying?

JOSHUA

No!

ELLEN

Ok...

JOSHUA

It was just so nice. We had such a nice time.

ELLEN

I'm glad.

JOSHUA

She's eighty-nine, she spent all day cooking Krau Pretzel for us.

ELLEN

Yum!

JOSHUA

Mom!

ELLEN

What?

JOSHUA

I'm trying to say something.

ELLEN

Am I stopping you?

JOSHUA

No-- you're just-- I'm trying to tell you I feel sad, and you're not like...

ELLEN

Don't be deceived. They've done this to themselves.

JOSHUA

Maybe they have, but they're still here, for now...

Beat

ELLEN

Mom?

RENEE

Yes Ellen.

ELLEN

It's your 90th next month.

RENEE

So it is.

ELLEN

We'd like to take you to dinner.

RENEE

Lovely!

ELLEN

Not that she's acknowledged my birthday in a decade.

JOSHUA

Not even a phone call?

ELLEN

Nothing.

JOSHUA

Nana arrives wearing big sunglasses. Her face is black and blue.

ELLEN

What happened?

RENEE

I fell.

JOSHUA

Nana falls a lot these days. She claims:

RENEE

I tripped.

JOSHUA

My mother hears:

RENEE

I was drinking.

ELLEN

Remember this place?

RENEE

Surely. I've not been here in years.

ELLEN

Well, good.

JOSHUA

It's a Mexican restaurant my grandparents used to go to.

ELLEN

It was incredibly thoughtful of me, but, whatever.

JOSHUA

Mom even musters a toast. It's unsentimental--

ELLEN

Fact based.

JOSHUA

But still-- a toast. Then, Nana says:

RENEE

I think it's such a shame you and your sister don't speak.

ELLEN

And, I think it's a shame you and your brother don't speak.

RENEE

That's different.

ELLEN

Is it?

RENEE

It's your fault Susan stopped speaking to you.

ELLEN

Is it?

RENEE

You should have gone to your nephew's wedding.

ELLEN

We couldn't. We were on vacation. Damn.

RENEE

You had more than enough time to make other arrangements.

JOSHUA

Quietly

She's not wrong...

ELLEN

Joshua.

RENEE

And Susan was terribly hurt that you refused to be her bridesmaid.

ELLEN

Are-- Wait are we digging back to the *nineteen-seventies*? Cause there's some things from the sixties I'd like to--

RENEE

Ellen: Let's drop it. I said my piece, I think you were wrong. Now we've finished it.

ELLEN

Oh no! No no. You skip out on things all the time if it's not *convenient*.

RENEE

I do not.

ELLEN

You didn't go to your own brother-in-law's funeral!

RENEE

I couldn't.

ELLEN

You couldn't?

RENEE

We were on vacation.

ELLEN

That's right! You were too busy *cruising* through Alaska to be with Sylvia as she buried her husband of *fifty* years.

RENEE

A dead person doesn't give a damn if you're at their funeral. They're dead.

JOSHUA

Did you know 2014 was Alaska's hottest July on record?

The women both look at him, then ignore him.

ELLEN

No one came to Rebecca's college graduation dinner, not you, not Susan, and no one stopped speaking to her, but--

RENEE

That's not the same as a wedding.

ELLEN

Who makes these rules? Do you just make them up as you go?

RENEE

Sometimes.

Quick beat

JOSHUA

There's basically no sea ice within 200 miles of the shore...

ELLEN

(on "200 miles)

So you can stop speaking to *your* brother, miss *funerals*, but when *I* can't make something--

RENEE

Ellen: let's drop it.

JOSHUA

Baked Alaska.

ELLEN

Joshua. I don't give a fuck about Alaska!

JOSHUA

WOOOOW. Ok.

ELLEN

And when I die, feel free to cruise wherever you like.

JOSHUA

I would never! Nothing is worse for the planet than a cruise!

RENEE

I'd like to make a toast.

ELLEN

What?

RENEE

It's really a thrill to be back here. Len and I used to come quite a lot. So I'd like to make a toast-- to Ricardo.

ELLEN

Who?

RENEE

He was the maitre'd. He always dressed impeccably, and he had a black mustache which he waxed, and he was always very kind to us. So, I'd like to make a toast to Ricardo.

ELLEN

To the dead maitre'd no one's ever heard of before.

JOSHUA

Cheers.

ELLEN

I need to get the fuck out of here.

As Ellen begins to exit, she continues to Joshua:

Everyone does whatever they want, no one says a thing, but if I do what I want, it's a problem. It's fucked. It's fucked, and I'm done. I'm done. I am fucking done with these fucking people who have tortured me for sixty fucking years and for what? The good things in my life-- anything good, *I* did-- *I* made-- and I don't want anything from them except to be left the fucking fuck alone!!

RENEE

Ellen? Your father fell.

Beat

ELLEN

Is he alright?

RENEE

They're taking him to the hospital in Queens.

ELLEN

Why Queens?

RENEE

That's where it happened.

ELLEN

What happened?

RENEE

He was at a closing, fell down some stairs and smacked his head.

ELLEN

Is he ok?

RENEE

I don't know.

ELLEN

Ok. Ok. Uhm... I'm at work, uhm, I'll take the train home, get my car, pick you up, then we can go to the hospital. Do you know what hospital he's at?

RENEE

In Queens!

ELLEN

Ok, I'll call you back.

JOSHUA

An hour later:

ELLEN

I'm almost at my stop, I'll jump in my car and pick you up.

RENEE

You don't need to get me.

ELLEN

You're taking a taxi?

RENEE

No!

ELLEN

Then how are you getting to the hospital?

RENEE

I'll see him tomorrow.

ELLEN

You don't want to see him today?

RENEE

What difference does it make? I'm not a doctor.

ELLEN

You don't want to see your husband?

RENEE

No!

ELLEN

Okayyyyy... well I'm going.

RENEE

Well bravo to you Ellen. Bravo to you.

JOSHUA

Later that afternoon, Nana calls back--

ELLEN

Drunk--

JOSHUA

And says:

RENEE

Just you remember something-- I'm his wife! Not you!

ELLEN

What?!?

RENEE

I'm his wife. Don't you forget it.

ELLEN

Then why don't you act like one?

Quick beat

JOSHUA

I think he's going to be ok.

ELLEN

Yeah, it looks that way.

JOSHUA

That's good, right?

Beat

ELLEN

I wish they'd just die already.

JOSHUA

I'm not sure Nana will ever die.

ELLEN

No. She's like a cockroach.

Quick beat

RENEE

Josh: It was a beautiful wedding, you and Nick were terrific. We want to talk more but we're on our way out to that opera movie, so I'll talk to you tonight or tomorrow, but everything was beautiful. Bye.

JOSHUA

Reader: I married him.

RENEE

And this is where?

JOSHUA

Siena.

RENEE

Oh yes.

JOSHUA

Do you remember The Custom of the Country?

RENEE

That's Wharton?

JOSHUA

Yes-- Undine Spragg, she goes to Siena on her honeymoon, so I always had it in my mind I should go to Sienna, too.

RENEE

Does she die at the end?

JOSHUA

No-- it's much better than that.

RENEE

What happens?

JOSHUA

I don't want to spoil it, you might want to read it again.

RENEE

Oh, you can tell me. I won't remember.

JOSHUA

I tell her what happens.

RENEE

Oh yes. That is clever.

JOSHUA

We loved Siena, but Undine was miserable there. Of course, that's where she gets pregnant...

RENEE

Do you want to have children?

JOSHUA

Nick does.

RENEE

What about you?

JOSHUA

I don't know. The world doesn't seem, like, long for this world. Climate change?

RENEE

Do you think that's real?

JOSHUA

Uh yes.

RENEE

Well I hope it happens.

JOSHUA

What?

RENEE

Winter is treacherous for people my age. So many friends have ended up with broken bones, slipping on ice. I'm glad for global warming.

JOSHUA

Nana please don't say that? It's actually very upsetting.

RENEE

Is it? Hmm.

Beat

Josh, there's something I've been wondering.

JOSHUA

Yes?

RENEE

Remember when you took me out for my birthday, to Serendipity's?

JOSHUA

Peanut butter sundaes. How could I forget?

RENEE

Why did you let me pay?

Beat

JOSHUA

What?

RENEE

When you took me for my birthday to Serendipity's, you let me pay. Why?

Beat

JOSHUA

That was-- years ago.

RENEE

Yes, and I've always wondered.

JOSHUA

I don't-- I was in college. I didn't have any money. Why?

RENEE

I've always wondered about it.

JOSHUA

That's what you remember?

Quick beat

ELLEN

Now can we get to the part where she dies?

JOSHUA

Yeah, definitely.

ELLEN

So in March of 2018, Mom goes into the hospital complaining of constipation. But it turns out she has cancer.

RENEE

Ellen. I have cancer.

JOSHUA

They're not going to operate?

ELLEN

Shaking her head no

She's almost ninety-four.

JOSHUA

She has 2 months to live?

ELLEN

If that. I race to the hospital, talk with her doctors, then Grandpa goes down the hall, and I am alone with her.

Hi Mom.

RENEE

Hello Ellen dear.

ELLEN

How are you?

RENEE

I feel fine! They tell me most people my age, who have what I have would have been doubling over.

ELLEN

But not you.

RENEE

I guess not.

ELLEN

So the doctor's going to let me bring you to your apartment, and I will look into an aide for you--

RENEE

I don't want an aide!

ELLEN

I know, but if you get uncomfortable, you might appreciate having someone who can administer morphine, and--

RENEE

Oh! Ok!

ELLEN

We'll make sure you're comfortable.

RENEE

Very well. Ellen, dear?

ELLEN

Yes?

RENEE

Your father. His mind isn't sharp. He forgets things.

ELLEN

Don't worry.

RENEE

You'll look out for him?

ELLEN

I will.

Beat

Mom? Do you want to go to Paris?

RENEE

Wouldn't that be nice?

ELLEN

I'm serious. We could go right now.

RENEE

No.

ELLEN

Walk along the Seine, have chocolate on Ile St. Louis...

RENEE

No no.

ELLEN

Bertillion ice cream. Are you sure? I would do it.

RENEE

No. I just want to go home, to my bed.

ELLEN

Ok.

RENEE

But I thank you for the offer.

Beat

JOSHUA

Then I show up.

RENEE

Joshua!

JOSHUA

She introduces me to her nurse.

RENEE

This is Frank. He's good, but very slow.

JOSHUA

We put them in a cab and take them home.

*Ellen gets Renee comfortable. Joshua stands by
the love seat.*

JOSHUA

I feel overwhelmed being in that apartment, remembering the
time I spent with her, the good things we did.

RENEE

I feel calm, and ready to die.

ELLEN

I feel calm, and ready for her to die.

JOSHUA

Not conflicted? Not even a little?

ELLEN

Sure. A little conflicted. Sure.

Mom-- tomorrow's the first night of Passover.

RENEE

Is it?

ELLEN

What do you say I bring our seder to your house?

RENEE

Oh would you? That would mean so much to your father.

ELLEN

We'll come at 4:30. I'll bring everything.

RENEE

Ellen? Thank you.

JOSHUA

That night, I write a letter. Five pages, by hand, thanking Nana for everything she has done for me-- and there's a lot-- the museums, the movies, the plays, the consideration and energy she has poured into me over so many years. I seal the letter, and put it aside, to give to her tomorrow.

ELLEN

That night, I make Matzo Ball soup. I make brisket. I make chicken. I am not religious, but it is not lost on me, this is to be the last seder I spend with my parents. The last holiday. And something inside is stirring-- as I think of my elderly parents, and my mother, and what, if anything, I need to say before she goes. I am thinking of this as I pour hot soup into tupperware, in preparation for tomorrow.

RENEE

That night, I lie in bed on the 18th floor and look out across the city. I love to watch the buildings go up. Len is working the phones-- he calls the other children, Robert in Connecticut, Susan in Florida. It seems he is calling everyone he ever met to tell them I'm dying. If it were up to me, I wouldn't tell anyone-- I'd just go. Leonard would like to live forever, but not I. For years, I've sent articles to Ellen about families taking extraordinary measures to keep their loved ones alive, in comas, on ventilators-- I send these articles and write in bold letters: READ THIS. NEVER DO THIS FOR ME. LET ME DIE. I send them to Ellen. She understands what I want. She always has...

JOSHUA

The next morning, Mom calls Nana.

ELLEN

... Matzo ball soup, broccoli pancakes, pineapple farfel--

RENEE

It's enough for an army.

ELLEN

And I'm bringing my own pots and pans, there'll be nothing for you to do.

RENEE

Wonderful.

ELLEN

So we'll see you and Dad at 4:30.

RENEE

And Robert.

ELLEN

My *brother* celebrates Passover? Since when?

RENEE

He called, he wants to come.

ELLEN

Ok.

RENEE

And Susan.

ELLEN

Excuse me?

RENEE

She's flying up from Florida. She's on her way.

Beat

ELLEN

Mom.

RENEE

What do you want from me?

ELLEN

If Susan's coming-- and that's absolutely fine-- I'll come another day.

RENEE

What do you want from me?

ELLEN

Nothing. It's fine. I'll come another day. It's absolutely fine.

JOSHUA

Five minutes later, the phone rings.

ELLEN

"Ellen. It's your father. We will send Susan away."

Dad-- if she's flying up to see you, it is fine with me if you want to see her-- absolutely fine.

"Susan will not be here. We will send her away. I promise."

She won't be there?

"I promise."

Renee in her nightgown, just as she was at the top of the show.

RENEE

Joshua.

It's your grandmother. I've got your next play.

JOSHUA

What?

RENEE

Your next play. It's called Battle of the Titans.

JOSHUA

Battle of the Titans?

RENEE

It'll be Virginia Woolf, Part II.

JOSHUA

I have-- always wanted to write about our family, I didn't know if-- I had your permission?

RENEE

Absolutely.

But I want you to promise me something...

Beat

JOSHUA

My parents pick me up. My mother's tense. She makes a call:

ELLEN

Hi Dad we're 10 minutes away we're just going to look for parking hopefully we can find something although it's not looking good but we'll drive around and if not we'll throw the car in a lot-- Mark oh Mark Mark there's a spot-- oh it's a pump, another fucking pump why are there are so many pumps in this city ok see you soon bye Dad bye.

JOSHUA

Why do you always monologue at people?

ELLEN

I was telling them we're on our way.

JOSHUA

My father says: "Your mother gave them a hundred outs-- If we show up, and Susan's there, I'm out of there."

ELLEN

She won't be there. They would have said something.

JOSHUA

When? You never stopped talking at them.

ELLEN

If only I could be more like you, you're perfect.

JOSHUA

We park. Rachel meets us downstairs. Nick is still at work. There are bags and bags of seder. We take the elevator up. Ring the bell. The sound of shoes. My grandfather opens the door.

ELLEN

Hi Dad.

JOSHUA

Uncle Robert sits on the pale green love seat. Nana, barefoot, in a white nightgown, sits beside him.

Aunt Susan stands behind her.

RENEE

Hello.

JOSHUA

Rachel says hello to everyone. I walk into the narrow kitchen. Mom starts unpacking, so I unpack, too.

Nana enters the kitchen.

RENEE

So what all did you bring?

ELLEN

Food. Is she staying?

RENEE

Yes.

ELLEN

That wasn't the deal.

RENEE

Well I *CHANGED* MY MIND.

JOSHUA

From the doorway my father says, "Fuck this," and storms out.

ELLEN

Mark is leaving.

RENEE

This is my house, I'll do what I want.

ELLEN

You promised she wouldn't be here.

RENEE

Well she is, so what.

ELLEN

You promised. I'm not staying.

RENEE

You're leaving?

ELLEN

Yes. We're leaving.

RENEE

Goddamit Ellen! Goddamit!

*Renee begins attacking Ellen, almost like an ape.
She is 93, barefoot, stricken with cancer,
beating on Ellen. Then:*

RENEE

She hit me! She hit me!

JOSHUA

Trapped in the back of the kitchen, I am the only one to witness Nana beating my mother. All they hear, on the other side of the door, is:

RENEE

She hit me! She hit me!

JOSHUA

In the other room, Aunt Susan says giddily, "I'm going, I'm going."

ELLEN

We're leaving.

RENEE

Get out of my house and never come back.

ELLEN

Susan, you can stay, we're leaving, you fucked this up like you do everything--

RENEE

(on "fucked")

It's my goddamn house I'll have anyone I damn please!

ELLEN

Yes you can. And I'm leaving it, now.

RENEE

But you don't have to leave.

JOSHUA

I-- I'm-- I'm not staying.

RENEE

Why?

JOSHUA

Just then the doorbell rings.

ELLEN

Hi Nick. We're leaving.

RENEE

You've really got material for your play now!

JOSHUA

Nana storms down the hall, in her nightgown.

RENEE

Nick! Nick! You're a psychiatrist. You've done a very bad job! Do something!

JOSHUA

Suddenly, my little sister is in Nana's face, wagging her finger: "Don't put him in the middle of this. I came to see you, I can't believe you did this."

RENEE

I didn't do anything!

ELLEN

You did this.

JOSHUA

Nana backs off.

ELLEN

You promised.

JOSHUA

The elevator doors close, and we are gone.

Beat

What just happened?

ELLEN

I don't know.

Beat

JOSHUA

It feels like we just walked into your childhood.

ELLEN

What do you mean?

JOSHUA

They lied to you, lured you under false pretenses, and when you didn't want to stay, Nana beat you-- she beat you-- Dad asks, "she beat you?"

ELLEN

She beat me.

JOSHUA

Dad apologizes for storming out.

ELLEN

Don't apologize. I think it was a great sign of love.

JOSHUA

It's like, she staged that moment.

ELLEN

She wanted that to happen.

JOSHUA

Why?

ELLEN

I don't know. I wonder... I think... I bet-- she could feel...

Because I was starting to feel...

Like I wanted to say something. To have a conversation. She must have sensed-- and she didn't want... she staged that-- to prevent us from getting too close. To protect herself...

Beat

JOSHUA

I don't think we're ever going to see her again.

ELLEN

I don't think so, no.

Quick beat.

JOSHUA

Standing there, I realize the letter I wrote is still in my pocket. I didn't give it to Nana. And I never will.

RENEE

Joshua, it's your grandmother. I have called your mother, I called Rachel, no one has answered. I need you. I'm sick, I can't get through to my doctor and I don't know what to do. Call me!

ELLEN

She has Susan, let Susan deal with it.

JOSHUA

But it turns out, she threw Susan out of the apartment, too-- we don't know why--

RENEE

Get out of my house and never come back!

JOSHUA

Now she is alone. Feeling like a victim. Which, I think, is how she likes to feel.

A long beat with Ellen, alone in thought. Then:

RENEE

Hello?

ELLEN

I have no interest in discussing what happened, but as your daughter, I will help arrange things. Strictly business.

RENEE

Very well.

ELLEN

Groceries. Bank accounts. Health aides.

JOSHUA

Four days ago, Nana beat my mother in her kitchen; now she's on the phone all day coordinating hospice.

My cousins fly in. I'm debating whether to go, when:

ELLEN

They think it's going to be soon. If you'd like to say goodbye, you should go today.

JOSHUA

That soon?

ELLEN

They think so, yes.

A beat. Then Joshua enters Renee's room.

RENEE

Your cousins are slobs! They left a half-eaten banana on the counter!

JOSHUA

They're running around after four toddlers, I think they're doing their best...

Renee makes a sarcastic sound.

JOSHUA

My cousin Steffi tries to laugh it off, which only causes Nana to say:

RENEE

You really have to do something about that vulgar laugh.

JOSHUA

Nana, I want to show you something.

RENEE

What?

JOSHUA

Remember this? These are the photos I took of everything in your apartment, with all my ten year old descriptions.

RENEE

Oh my god.

JOSHUA

Ferdi Schluss, Paris.

RENEE

I want you to know that this boy, and I, had some of the greatest times doing this.

JOSHUA

It was fun.

RENEE

He was an absolute doll, and I hope he enjoyed it as much as I did.

JOSHUA

I did.

RENEE

Bury it with me.

JOSHUA

Everyone laughs. Except Grandpa. Who says, "Hon! May I have it? I don't want it buried with ya, unless there's a duplicate."

RENEE

Oh, ok. Ok.

JOSHUA

Somehow, Nick ushers everyone out of the room. I am alone with Nana and Grandpa. And I do something which, I confess, I have done before-- I press record.

RENEE

You recorded our last conversation?

JOSHUA

Yes.

RENEE

Without telling me?

JOSHUA

Yes.

He picks up the transcripts and passes them out.

These are the transcripts.

Mom-- I'm gonna need you to read Grandpa.

ELLEN

Do I have to?

They all settle in with their transcripts.

JOSHUA

How do you feel?

RENEE

Good! I want to know what dying is.

JOSHUA

Are you s-- Are you feeling scared, or you feel ok?

RENEE

I don't feel scared, I-- I'm very happy.

LEONARD

She's not scared.

RENEE

The sooner it happens, the better, but--

LEONARD

(voice breaking)

She's one of the bra-- bravest people I know.

RENEE

What dear?

JOSHUA

He said you're very brave.

RENEE

I'm not. I'm too dumb to know any better.

JOSHUA

I've been thinking a lot about some of the stuff we did, as a child, and uhm, going to Dances with Wolves and going to the Met when I was six and making art, and--

RENEE

Now I want to ask you something? When you walked out that day, and I called you, why didn't you call me back?

JOSHUA

I don't-- Do you really want to talk about that, or do--

RENEE

Yes.

JOSHUA

Uh, it was a horrific day, I was really shocked by what I saw.

RENEE

I'm sure. I was too.

JOSHUA

Yeah.

RENEE

Yes, but I do want to talk about it more. Do you want to talk alone?

JOSHUA

We can, if you want.

LEONARD

You know-- Can I just say one thing?

RENEE

Sure.

LEONARD

The mistake that was made as far--

RENEE

Len I don't hear.

LEONARD

The mistake that was made as far as your, your, your grandmother and myself is, we didn't have the slightest idea that Susan was staying.

RENEE

That she would move as slowly as she did.

LEONARD

We we we thought that she would be out. We never would have--

JOSHUA

I don't know that it's-- we sh-- it's worth rehashing at this point--

LEONARD

No but--

JOSHUA

It's really not.

LEONARD

But I just want you to know, that we didn't--

RENEE

I just want to know why you didn't call me back.

JOSHUA

I was upset. I was upset.

RENEE

That upset?

JOSHUA

I was.

RENEE

Do you have any idea how upset I was?

JOSHUA

I'm sure. I'm sure it was both.

RENEE

Ok.

JOSHUA

Yeah.

RENEE

Alright.

JOSHUA

Yeah.

RENEE

Then we finished it.

JOSHUA

Ok.

Beat

RENEE

And I do want you to know one other thing. I called out to Nick.

JOSHUA

That put him in a really horrible position.

RENEE

That's what, uh, Rachel told me.

JOSHUA

Yeah.

RENEE

I said, be a doctor, help us, we need help.

JOSHUA

That's-- that's not his job.

RENEE

And she said...

JOSHUA

He's uh--

RENEE

Unfair.

JOSHUA

He-- That's not fair to him.

LEONARD

Josh?

RENEE

Ok. That was it.

LEONARD

We-- your, your, your, your grandmother and myself, we had nothing to do with, how to, how it started out.

RENEE

Alright however it turned out that's how it turned out.

LEONARD

We were-- we were-- we were as shocked as you people were.

JOSHUA

It's probably better
not to rehash it.

RENEE

All I want you to know is,
I'm delighted that you came back.

JOSHUA

Well.

RENEE

Thank you.

JOSHUA

Good. Well, I wanted to talk to you, I wanted to say what I'd been thinking about and remembering.

RENEE

Anything else you want to say, or be alone?

JOSHUA

Yeah. Yeah. Can I have a minute with Nana?

LEONARD

Yes, I'll get out of here in a minute.

JOSHUA

Seeing The Heiress. With Cherry Jones?

RENEE

Surely. That was long ago.

JOSHUA

I was remembering--

RENEE

I understand there's a fantastic show today, at the Armory.

JOSHUA

Yerma.

RENEE

Yes.

JOSHUA

Yerma.

RENEE

You can't get in, you can't get tickets, they're pleading and begging, let me in just to see it.

JOSHUA

Mmhmm.

RENEE

Have you seen it?

JOSHUA

No.

RENEE

Are you going to?

JOSHUA

I'm not gonna make it. I go into rehearsal in 2 weeks, for the next one.

LEONARD

What's that one?

JOSHUA

Skintight.

LEONARD

Skintight.

RENEE

I don't know, if I ever got the chance to tell you, but I think your new play is...

I am so proud of you.

JOSHUA

Thank you.

RENEE

Very, very, very proud of you.

JOSHUA

Well. You had a very big influence on me.

RENEE

Thank you. Couldn't have said anything nicer.

JOSHUA

It's true.

Quick beat

RENEE

I wanted to be one.

She laughs

JOSHUA

Well you were.

RENEE

I succeeded in something, at least. I want you to know, your mother has been tr-- trying very hard, to be very kind.

JOSHUA

Mm hmm.

RENEE

She has--

JOSHUA

She's done a lot of work.

RENEE

Much more empathy than your Aunt.

JOSHUA

Mm hmm.

RENEE

Susan thinks she's being empathetic, she's trying--

LEONARD

There's no compar-- there's no comparison.

RENEE

But she's off in another world.

LEONARD

There's no compari--

RENEE

Tells me what she's drinking every morning, for coffee and such--

LEONARD

There's no comparison.

RENEE

Your mother has tried.

JOSHUA

She did a lot of work, she tried to organize aides, and social workers--

RENEE

I know, I know. Absolutely unnecessary but she tried. There really is so little to do.

JOSHUA

No, there's a lot. Mom's been dealing with it all. It's a lot. In term--

RENEE

Len, is there a lot?

JOSHUA

She came in at 8 to interview this one, she coordinated--

RENEE

I've got a lovely woman now, I think it's through your mother. Tiffany.

JOSHUA

Yeah.

RENEE

She's a big woman, and I like the fact that she's a big woman. When she picks me up, I know I'm being held.

JOSHUA

Yeah.

RENEE

And, no everything really-- it's going as smoothly as it could. I just want it to hurry up a little bit.

LEONARD

I'm gonna leave you people.

Ellen puts down the transcript, and exits.

JOSHUA

So I was just remembering all of the things, you know, the-- you took me to Mapplethorpe? When I was like, ten? Which was very scary.

RENEE

Yeah.

JOSHUA

And, uh, you took me to see this exhibit, Pubic Hair on Soap?

RENEE

Oh God, yes.

JOSHUA

A bar of soap with a piece of pubic hair on it, that was in a frame.

RENEE

Lord, you remember everything.

JOSHUA

Everything. It's all here.

RENEE

Oh, Josh.

JOSHUA

It's all here.

RENEE

It's been a very good relationship.

JOSHUA

Yeah.

RENEE

I don't know if one remembers up there or down here or whatever, but it's been good. And it's meant a great deal to me, to know you.

JOSHUA

Breaking

And to me, too.

RENEE

It has. I'm very grateful for it.

JOSHUA

As am I.

RENEE

And I had a very good life, I really did, and your grandfather has tried so hard to be good to me.

JOSHUA

Yeah.

RENEE

And-- just be good to him, after I'm gone. He needs lots of support. He wants it, and he needs it.

JOSHUA

Mmhmm.

RENEE

Much more than I do. He cannot manage alone.

JOSHUA

Of course.

RENEE

But, you can't trust him, he'll give away everything he's got. And I want you kids to have it. I don't know how far it goes today. But when you have an especially good time, say, my grandmother is thinking of me.

Her voice might be just about to break.

That's all. I love you, and always will.

JOSHUA

I love you too.

RENEE

I'm so glad you came back.

They kiss 3 times.

Thank you.

JOSHUA

Me too. I know Rachel wants to talk to you a little, let me get her.

Pointing to the TV.

This is horrible. How do you even have it on? Are you not--

RENEE

Oh I do, it keeps me company all night.

JOSHUA

Are you thinking about a lot of things here, or...

RENEE

Not too many. I'm thinking, what a bastard.

JOSHUA

Right.

RENEE

I'm thinking, what a horrible man.

JOSHUA

Yeah.

RENEE

And I'm thinking that it's a pity, that our government is degraded, to this position. The great United States is at the mercy of this idiot.

JOSHUA

That's-- that's what you get to think about, your last few...

RENEE

I don't know.

JOSHUA

Yeah.

RENEE

It frightens me.

JOSHUA

Well. We'll be here, we'll--

RENEE

Where do we go from here?

JOSHUA

Let you know, how it goes.

He laughs.

RENEE

Yeah. Where do we go from here, though?

JOSHUA

I don't know. Probably, anarchy.

RENEE

What's your next play going to be?

JOSHUA

Uh, Skintight?

RENEE

No I don't mean that one, after that.

JOSHUA

This family. The one you told me to write.

RENEE

Are you really going to?!

JOSHUA

Maybe! You told me to!

RENEE

I did. Do you have the courage?

JOSHUA

I don't know. We'll find out.

RENEE

Joshua I'm gonna be watching.

He laughs.

From above or below, but I'll be watching.

JOSHUA

Warts and all.

More laughter.

RENEE

Fantastic. Honestly. That would be the greatest--

JOSHUA

Four days later, she was unconscious.

Ellen enters and stands over Renee, as Joshua watches from the edge of the room.

Her eyes were closed, her breathing labored. She was making the most awful gurgling sounds, and a brown liquid had formed in her throat and sometimes ran down the sides of her mouth.

A long beat, as they stare at Renee.

ELLEN

I keep thinking of the time I was in sixth grade, we were having a mother-daughter tea at school, I was all dressed up, in my little party dress and patent leather shoes. They served cucumber sandwiches, and we'd made these little picture books to give to our mothers, and everyone's mother came except mine. I kept asking the school secretary to call home and she'd call and say, "there's no answer, I'm sorry." "Can you try again? Can you try again" Finally I went and sat on the front steps, alone in my little party

dress, waiting for her, while everyone else had tea with their mothers inside.

JOSHUA

What happened?

ELLEN

She got drunk. She forgot.

JOSHUA

What'd she say?

ELLEN

We never talked about it.

JOSHUA

But what'd she say when you gave her the picture book?

ELLEN

I didn't. I threw it out.

Goodbye, Mom.

JOSHUA

My grandfather hung on for one more lonely year, then we buried him, too. As we cleaned out their apartment, what shocked me most of all, more than the letters from the institution, was finding the playbill from the musical I was in, the night she'd shown up drunk. She had saved it. She had saved it.

My mother and aunt divided up her belongings without starting World War III. Soon, pieces of Nana's life were being shipped across the world. I was the only one left in Manhattan, so making the shortest journey of all, just across the park, were two Parisian love seats. They're mine, now.

I wish I saw the world as black or white. But the truth is more complex. Women who should not have been mothers can make very compelling grandmothers. Devoted mothers can raise ungrateful sons.

ELLEN

A few weeks after she died, I'm walking up Madison Avenue, near 58th Street, I pass a store-- Sermoneta Gloves. A pair

of fuchsia leather gloves is in the window. SO bright. And I thought, the only person who would be as struck by this as I was, who would be excited, was Nana. But I couldn't tell her about them.

JOSHUA

You can in a play.

Renee emerges.

RENEE

Fuchsia!

Quick beat.

ELLEN

Fuchsia leather.

RENEE

What kind of *leather*?

ELLEN

I don't know. Just-- leather. Are there different kinds?

RENEE

(Rolling her eyes: obviously!)

Full grain. Split grain. Top grain.

ELLEN

I don't know.

RENEE

Let's ask. Sir? The fuchsia gloves in the window-- what kind of *leather* are they?

ELLEN

Why do you pronounce leather like that?

RENEE

Am I saying it incorrectly?

ELLEN

No, you just emphasize it so much. *Leather!*

RENEE

It's how I talk, Ellen.

ELLEN

It's very strange.

RENEE

I suppose it is.

Beat

JOSHUA

Are there any grandchildren here, sitting beside your grandmothers? A word of advice: take good notes. Things are changing so fast. New York doesn't get much snow these days, and most of the movie theatres Nana took me to are gone. Rainforests, glaciers... it was too beautiful to last. But we had it, for a time. And each other. That will have to be enough.

And Nana, if you're really watching-- wherever you are... I just want to say...

Thanks.

Blackout.

End of Play.